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An Unexpected Journey: How a Community Based Learning Experience Changed My Teaching Praxis

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Abstract

This paper presents my firsthand experience as a participant in a community based learning experience in the Dominican Republic and my reflections about developing an educational praxis that prepares students to meet Ignatius' goal of overcoming all evils that beset humankind. In particular, five pedagogical lessons in service of this goal are presented: (1) educators should take the student perspective to facilitate more effective classrooms; (2) students engaging in action will develop a much broader understanding than students learning in a passive manner; (3) contrary to popular belief, confusion is one of our most valuable and underutilized teaching tools; (4) incorporating opportunities for students to develop genuine relationships within educational settings catalyzes a higher level of engagement and; and (5) if our classrooms are designed to allow students opportunities to make the world a better place, more often than not, they will succeed. My experience allowed me to better understand both the Jesuit educational mission and develop pedagogical tools that will meet this mission. I encourage all educators (teachers, staff, and administrators) to engage in their own unique community based learning experiences, as it will change their opinion of what is possible with education.

"The Road goes ever on and on. Down from the door where it began. Now far ahead the Road has gone, and I must follow, if I can."

This opening quotation summarizes my experience as an assistant professor at a Jesuit institution. Regis University is full of life, friendship, and deeply committed individuals. I am fortunate to be a part of a community where the late night discussions gravitate towards using teaching to change lives and empower society, and where colleagues are always present to lend a helping hand and warm hug when I inevitably fall a little short. In four short years, these relationships and our shared Jesuit mission have drastically altered my vision of education. None of these experiences has been more transformative than my experience on a Community Based Learning (CBL) trip to the Dominican Republic. In this paper, I present insights from my experience as a CBL participant to both illustrate these vast benefits and persuade other educators to follow me down this road.

My Mission

Before sharing the nuts and bolts of my argument, I will present my understanding of the Jesuit mission. From my earliest days on campus, I kept asking my colleagues a simple question, "What is the Jesuit mission?" I never received a straight answer. Ask five faculty at a Jesuit institution one question, you will get eight answers! So, I set out on a path to develop my own answer. I first turned to the Spiritual Exercises.

In the reflection entitled, "Call of the King," Ignatius, writing as if he were Jesus, states: "I want to overcome all diseases, all poverty, all ignorance, all oppression and slavery—in short all the evils which beset humankind."² For me, this is humankind's ultimate mission, but how does it translate to educational praxis? Pedro Arrupe, S.J. gave an answer in his famous "Men for Others" speech: "Our prime educational objective must be to form men-and-women-for-others.... Men and

women who will live not for themselves but for God and his Christ- for the God-man who lived and died for all the world; men and women who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors; men and women completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce.”³ Using his power as Superior General, Fr. Arrupe declares Men-and-women-for-others “the paramount objective of Jesuit education.”⁴ While Fr. Arrupe does not exactly tell educators what they need to do, he at least provides a concrete goal. In light of this challenge, I have spent these last four years looking for methods for its realization.

Community Based Learning: A Short Primer

Community based learning (CBL) is defined as the act of engaging the community during the learning process. It has roots in the teaching of John Dewey⁵ and the actions of Jane Addams,⁶ director of Hull House, the first community based living community. The idea behind community based learning is to provide students an opportunity to learn outside of the insular academic environment by experiencing ideas and testing theories in the “real world.” CBL also encourages collaboration with the poor and marginalized to manifest social change. As CBL has become more common across the US, research describing its benefits has started to appear. These benefits can range from enhanced pro-social and empathic responding,⁷ greater student interest,⁸ less stress,⁹ and even greater academic success.¹⁰ Anecdotal, participating in a CBL experience provided great clarity and understanding about effective pedagogy in particular, but this experience also proved to be the most transformative learning experiences of my life.

Five Lessons Garnered From My CBL Experience

My CBL experience began with a chance meeting with the director of student development and community partnerships. Paul “Pablo” Burson asked me to join a

spring break trip to the Dominican Republic. I immediately said yes, applied for my passport renewal, and waited. Truthfully, I did not know what I had signed up for. On some level I thought I was getting a free vacation to a beautiful nation in exchange for chaperoning undergraduates. I had no clue how this “vacation” would change my life and approach to pedagogy. As Pablo and I are friends, he knew I was interested in the Dominican Republic trip and worked diligently to ensure my inclusion. Pablo’s enthusiasm and effort also stemmed from the difficulty of finding faculty to go on these trips. Faculty members are extremely busy, and convincing us to take time out of our spring and winter breaks is often a hard sell.

Once in the Dominican Republic, I spent time in four locales. The first three days and nights were spent in a small mountain-farming village located in the mountains referred to in this article as Arroyo in an attempt to maintain the privacy of the villagers that live there. Here, pairs of us stayed with host families. My partner and Spanish translator was a former Regis student who spent the past year living and teaching in the village. The next three days were spent divided between the Batey Libertad, an impoverished community of plantation farmers located about twenty minutes from Santiago, and our hotel in the heart of Santiago. We went back to Arroyo for two more days, and then we finished our trip enjoying the beach at one of the beautiful resort towns. These ten days were nothing less than action-packed. Every day felt like an entire week, and each of these “weeks” drastically altered my approach to pedagogy.

Lesson #1: Perspective taking

The single most valuable aspect of my CBL trip was seeing the world through the eyes of a student again. If you want to understand your students, become a better teacher, and get stronger teaching evaluations, then I recommend placing yourself in a situation where you are a student. I frankly experienced more intellectual growth during my time in the Dominican Republic than during any other ten-day period of my life, and I now

strive to provide my students with similar opportunities in my traditional classroom. In putting myself in the position of a student, the first thing I began to appreciate was the vulnerability and fears that students face. Being in an unfamiliar country, I did not want to look silly or unintelligent in front of my fellow sojourners. I definitely did not want my fellow students to laugh at me. In essence, I was afraid, and I am sure many students feel the same way when they walk into a college classroom. Fortunately, the fear passed as I connected with the cohort of students, and eventually, I began to feel safe. This feeling of safety does not simply materialize; it requires bonding experiences. For example, on our first day in the village, one of the students had everyone in the group play a hand slapping game with all the village girls. It is amazing how this simple game was an experience that began to draw everyone closer. Other bonding experiences included daily reflections, playing baseball and soccer against the locals, eating fried plantains and drinking Coca-Cola at a local restaurant, and simply stating what we were thankful for at the end of our daily reflection. These experiences led me to appreciate the importance of ice-breakers and team activities in fostering the type of classroom where people freely discuss and debate.

The second aspect of student life that I certainly appreciated was utter freedom of will. I had very few responsibilities. I was not in charge of any lessons or course direction. I was free to do as much or as little as I wanted to do. There were times on the trip when I completely tuned everything and everyone out, and other times when I was completely engaged and enthralled. At still other times, I deeply meditated and reflected on the previous day's experiences and on this freedom that I encountered. As teachers, we have a tendency to believe that we cause learning, but ultimately, the student decides what and how much they get out of a lesson.

In fact, on this trip, I found that personal journaling was one of the most powerful tools of growth; it was an opportunity to solidify my thoughts into concrete bits of knowledge,

opinion, and transformation. Teachers cannot force interest onto students, just like my fellow sojourners could not force me to be interested in dancing (even though they tried). This is not a particularly new idea for me. During my undergraduate experience my favorite papers were the ones where I choose the topic, my favorite projects were the ones I designed and developed, and my favorite classes were the ones that were most closely related to my life and interests. Nonetheless, students ultimately decide what they do. One important Jesuit value is "unity of heart and mind." My interpretation of this value is that students need to connect their passions and interests with their academic studies. In the past, I found myself trying to turn my subject into my students' passion. I now realize that this strategy will not work, and my job is to allow and encourage my students to connect their life to the subjects that I love and teach with and for them.

Lesson #2: Action based education

The most common form of educational presentation, by far, is the lecture. Continuing on my theme of perspective-taking, I recently experienced a few slideshow-driven lectures unrelated to work. The experience was quite eye-opening. I found myself blankly staring at the screen and reading the slides as someone read them to me. I was completely passive in the learning experience, and eventually, I decided to stare out the window and then check email on my phone. I also, recently watched Ed Boyden's amazing TED talk on optogenetics where I learned about how neuroscientists control individual neurons with light and have used this same technology to cure macular degeneration in mice.¹¹ It's one of the best lectures I have ever experienced, and I spent thirty minutes completely enthralled. As anyone who has gone to college will tell you, the slideshow lecture format is hit or miss. Sometimes professors knock it out of the park, and sometimes they don't. However, even when the lecture is entertaining, it is still a passive learning experience. During a lecture, students are not asked to do much other than take notes, prepare for a test, and maybe answer a few simple "are you listening" questions.

Research also indicates that lectures are an effective tool for passing information;¹² however, a classic study indicates that students reading a textbook by themselves are just as effective as the lecture¹³ and a more recent study shows that lecture is as effective as an interactive video disk.¹⁴ However, passing information by itself is not going to complete Arrupe's vision.

The most salient lesson I gleaned from my CBL experience is that education can be powerful, engaging, and fun when students are participating in action. For example, during our trip we taught school in a farming community, went to Ash Wednesday mass in a bustling city, and played basketball with new friends in the Batey. These experiences taught me that acting on and in the world forces one to notice the world as it is. For example, on the way to the Batey, I noticed something peculiar: military checkpoints were only on one side of the road. This perplexed me because I didn't quite understand what kind of military threat only traveled one way. It just made absolutely no sense, and I started asking questions.

I learned that the checkpoints were designed to keep Haitian immigrants out of the Dominican Republic. Thus, the road *into* Haiti was not being checked. I also noticed that most times we were allowed to pass through the checkpoints without stopping, except for the one time we had Haitian-Dominicans with us. Again, this made no sense to me. Aren't foreigners more of a threat than any national? So again, I asked. I learned that our white skin placed us at the top of the Dominican Republic's social hierarchy.¹⁵ This also allowed me to answer a question about one of my favorite Dominicans, former Chicago Cub Sammy Sosa. After Sammy retired, a picture of him surfaced where he clearly lightened his skin color. At the time, I remember thinking this was extremely weird, and I could not understand why anyone would do such a thing. Other Americans could not understand this either, and it became a full-blown scandal.¹⁶ After experiencing life in the Dominican Republic, I completely understand Sammy's actions. It also explains why most of

my non-Haitian Dominican friends claimed to be of Spanish decent and refused to acknowledge their visible African heritage. While these experiences seem trivial, experiencing them allowed me to fully understand the depths with which prejudice is woven into the fabric of this otherwise beautiful culture. It is one thing to read about prejudice and another to live, breathe, eat, and bathe in it.

Learning from action is not a common pedagogical practice in higher education. Some educators will argue that learning from an action cannot take place until the background foundation is developed. Nonetheless, I had no background knowledge and the experiences caused me to develop a deep personal understanding of Dominican culture and life. I think our tendency to view background knowledge and information as foundational is woven into the American educational fabric. The traditional American classroom is often organized so that students first learn as much background information as possible, and then complete an assignment as evidence that they have mastered the information (often an exam or paper). Implicit in this system is the idea that you need a formal understanding of a subject before you can do anything.

However, I did not need an academic background in the Dominican Republic to develop a pretty good understanding of the culture. I think modern educators would benefit greatly by listening to the words of John Dewey: "give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results."¹⁷ I was given many things to do in the Dominican Republic, and I was transformed as a result.

Lesson #3: The disorganized world elicits the human need for understanding

Dewey never formulated a reason as to why "doing" works so well, but my personal experience, coupled with recent psychological findings can shed some light on the answer. Being in the Dominican Republic was a shock to my system. I did not understand how the

culture worked, and I often found myself making mistakes. For example, one night my friend and I decided to make our host family American chili complete with five pounds of hamburger. Unfortunately, we did so on a Friday during Lent in a very Catholic household. Clearly, I was a bit confused. I felt this confusion a lot: when dancing (is it really just one move over and over?), when eating (why are they watching me?), when driving (oh my god, are we going to die?), and when using the bathroom (what is this bucket for?). Confusion is an unpleasant feeling, but when I was confused in the Dominican Republic, I felt a drive to reduce this confusion. Recent research on the meaning maintenance model strongly supports this claim.

The meaning maintenance model is a social psychological theory suggesting that one of the most powerful human motives is to make sense of our world.¹⁸ One of the interesting claims of this model is that automatic cognitive processes are often used to fill in meaning without conscious awareness. For example, in one clever study, confusion was instantiated by having participants read a story by Franz Kafka; control participants read a similar, non-Kafka story. All participants were then presented a fairly difficult pattern identification task. Those individuals who read Kafka were much better at identifying the pattern, but they could not verbalize the rules to the pattern they were recognizing. The authors assert that these findings indicate that humans have a non-conscious cognitive process that makes sense of the world.¹⁹ In essence, humans appear to be meaning-making machines. When placed in a confusing environment, it is human nature to make sense of it. Ironically, professors often try to eliminate confusion entirely via rubrics, project checklists, and even comprehensive step-by-step instruction guides. Interestingly, our students learn through confusion, and we should let them experience it from time to time.

I experienced these tensions and resolutions firsthand in the Dominican Republic. In addition to my cultural confusion, Pablo did an amazing job of utilizing these meaning

maintenance processes. Honestly, at first I was completely terrified. There were no handouts, no rubric, no objectives or goals, and only a very limited itinerary. My fellow sojourners and I were constantly asking Pablo questions. “What are we doing today?” Pablo’s response: “experiencing life.” “What’s the purpose of our trip?” Pablo’s response: “it’s different for everyone.” “Where are we going today?” Pablo’s response: “just down the road here.” At first, I thought the trip was going to be a disaster. But, as the trip progressed, my fellow sojourners and I resolved our own tensions and began to learn, grow, and transform. We began to understand the complexities of the history, economics, medicine, and psychology of this culture. We began to make sense of the world and also better understand why similar things happen in the United States. However, as I continue to reflect on pedagogy, a heretical thought came to my mind. Is organization bad for student growth?

In my opinion, our modern educational era will likely be remembered for: (1) organization and (2) massive amounts of organization. Walk into most classrooms and the organization is blatant: highly detailed rubrics, daily outlines, slideshow slides that often start with an outline of the day’s discussion, and project guides that take the guesswork out of the project. There is no confusion; students know exactly what is expected of them and exactly what they should do. Teachers are further evaluated on how “organized” the class is and how much student “understood what was expected to do well in the course.”

What does this hyper-organization teach our students? One possible answer is that students learn how to follow rules and steps. Will following the rules teach our students how to end all social evils that beset our world? I think not. In fact, it may teach them the opposite. Specifically, many social evils are carried out by individuals simply following orders and rules without question. In many ways a healthy education teaches students to evaluate and question the veracity, morality, and necessity of rules. However, as Friere²⁰ points out, “education either functions as an

instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

While the above statement is a bit hyperbolic, research suggests that critical thinking is at an all-time low in the American university,²¹ providing some credence to these concerns. Nonetheless, most educators do not simply want to teach students rules. Instead, we devise these rules and structures in an attempt to teach our students how to solve complex problems using creativity and critical thinking. But, does this strategy work? In order to examine this question, I conducted a simple experiment. I gave two classes the same assignment: one class received a step-by-step guide and the other received a very simplified assignment handout. After students completed the assignment, I began asking them “why” questions. Why did you do this, why did you do that? The “organized” class was much more confident in the quality of their work, but they also had a superficial understanding of the assignment when compared to the “disorganized” class. It’s akin to the difference between a complex computer algorithm and a sentient human being. We can develop a program that can emulate speech and emotion, but we can’t construct a computer that is truly human, complete with compassion, empathy, and the ability to construct a profound poem. My CBL experience taught me the value of confusion, and I will never look at a course assignment sheet the same way again. How will our students develop the skills necessary to end all social evils that beset humankind, if they are never taught to deal with the confusion of our natural world?

Lesson #4: The power of relationships

These insights on confusion truly surprised me, but the power of real, genuine personal relationships moved me. One of my clearest memories from my trip was a discussion I had with a factory worker about life. The

conversation started off as small talk, but as I connected more to this individual, I learned that he was deeply hurt by his situation. For example, he told me of the dehumanizing working conditions he faced: he only had two minutes for all bathroom breaks, he was not paid if he was late from one of these breaks, he could not afford the very product that he made, and he found his work demeaning. He was hired under the promise of learning a new skill, but instead he found a job that taught him how to make one specific piece of a sandal. When I asked him if he was happy, he replied, “happiness was a distant memory.” This interaction and relationship changed my life and my conception of education. If I was able to learn so much from one relationship, what could relationships do for my students?

This was not the only personal relationship I forged. I had very interesting conversations with some Dominicans of Haitian descent living in the Batey, a densely populated village of plantation workers. In my conversations with these people, I learned of a recent legal case where the Dominican government essentially stole their citizenship. The courts ruled that any Dominican of Haitian descent born after 1929 was not a legal Dominican citizen even if they had identifying documents.²² In our interactions, these young adults recalled multiple times when members of the army rounded up anyone in the Batey without papers on their person and deported them to Haiti. This is particularly disturbing when you consider that most of these individuals do not speak Haitian Creole, the language of Haiti.

After these conversations, I wondered how a whole group of citizens could be disenfranchised. So, I began asking deep and difficult questions. I reasoned that before the recent ruling, technically, Dominicans of Haitian descent could vote, and my friends confirmed this. However, they also provided great clarity on their disenfranchisement. Particularly, they told me that members of the military were not allowed to vote, which seems harmless until I learned that a large percentage of the Dominican soldiers are of Haitian descent. They also told me that

Dominicans of Haitian descent who vote face threats of violence and death. For example, they told me of an incident where six individuals of Haitian descent were violently murdered. These conversations allowed me to make connections back to my own country's history where similar tactics were used in the United States to disenfranchise African American voters.

Even with all these insights, I still understood my friends' struggles best when I witnessed them firsthand. On the most special day of our journey, we joined our friends in a recreational outing. I can't say what we did, since it is a surprise for the future sojourners on this trip. I was having one of the best times of my life, until I learned that our tour guides were being downright offensive to our friends of Haitian descent. They were calling them dirty, pigs, dogs, stinky, and referring to them using the most derogatory and disgusting racial slurs. Needless to say, I felt rage, anger, and powerlessness: the same feelings that victims of prejudice face every day of their lives. It's one thing to be enraged when we read the stories of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner; it's another to see racial injustice happen to a friend.

Clearly, relationships are powerful teaching tools that can help students gain a deeper understanding of very difficult problems. In terms of teaching, meaningful relationships are important catalysts of the learning process. When I saw the fear, anger, and frustration in my friends' eyes as they talked about the injustices they experienced firsthand, the problem felt more real, more important, and more worthy of intellectual pursuit. In terms of getting our students interested in social injustices that do not directly affect them, relationships may be the best catalyst.

Beyond recognizing the importance of relationships in the learning process, we must think about how to incorporate relationships into our classrooms. One example comes from my course on racial justice in American society. In this course, I provide students an opportunity to have coffee with a homeless person of color. Basically, four or five

students meet with a man or woman and share their stories. Multiple students have told me that this was one of the most eye-opening education experiences of their lives. This activity is adaptable for other disciplines and topics. It was originally designed by a different professor for students studying the psychology and history of war. As an additional example, a colleague of mine is going to use a similar technique when teaching a class on addiction.

Regardless of how an individual instructor adapts this activity or incorporates relationships in an entirely different way, it is clear that personal relationships deserve more prominence in education, and I am confident that we can, and should, devise ways to incorporate relationships into our work.

Lesson #5: The power of doing

Relationships are amazing learning tools, but how do we lead students to change the world? Ignatius is credited with saying, "go and set the world on fire," but he never tells us how to do this. Obviously, there is no correct answer for this question, but during my CBL experience my fellow sojourners and I learned that students can change the world if we as educators let them try.

To sum up this final point, I will share the most moving and significant experience of our time in the Dominican Republic. In the Batey we encountered a baby boy named "Charlie." Charlie was two years old but was so malnourished that he appeared to be only nine months old. The Regis group that came the previous year had taken one-year-old Charlie to the hospital for similar ailments. The sad truth of Charlie's story was that his mother did not have the resources to take care of him. She had just had another baby with her new husband, who was not Charlie's father, and the husband was not as concerned with Charlie's health as he was that of his own child.

Before passing judgment, one must realize that the level of poverty in the Batey is unlike anything I have seen before. Within my first five minutes of being on the Batey, I noticed

thirty children, some as young as a year old, playing on a giant hill. When I looked closer, I noticed that most of them did not have any pants, underwear, or diapers. When I looked even closer, I noticed that the hill was composed of garbage. When I looked around the village, I saw that whole families lived in ten-foot by ten-foot houses made of cinderblock and corrugated metal. Medical care is something that these villagers simply cannot afford, and death is all too common for children in this village.

As a group, we wondered what we could possibly do to end the suffering of this child. First, we pooled our resources to pay for Charlie's healthcare needs. Then, Pablo enlisted three Regis students to accompany baby Charlie, his mother, and his baby brother to the hospital. Pablo asked me to come, too. We all drove down to the clinic, and we dropped off the young women and the small family, leaving the young women to handle this important task. At first, I assumed my purpose was to supervise and guide the college students, but much to my own surprise, the welfare of baby Charlie was left in the hands of four women in their early twenties, and they handled the task beautifully. But this was just the beginning to this story.

Our group began to wonder what would happen to Charlie once we were gone. It was clear that his family did not have the resources to raise him. One of the young women who accompanied Charlie to the clinic called her fiancé to ask if they could adopt Charlie. While this did not happen, what did happen was equally miraculous. The group brainstormed what would be best for Charlie, and the villagers from Arroyo helped us reach a solution. "Rosa", my host mother from the mountain-farming town, agreed to adopt Charlie when Pablo told her about Charlie and his situation. Our group saved Charlie's life (one year later he is tall, chubby, and very happy looking); I doubt that Charlie would be alive if we did not intervene. Through this experience, the students learned the valuable lesson that they can change the world. Interestingly, this intervention also may have

played a tiny role in changing bias and prejudice in Arroyo. Charlie is a baby of Haitian descent being raised by Dominican parents. In a country where prejudice is so apparent in every facet of life, this is nothing short of a miracle. Every student on the trip learned that they have the power to make the difference. If one small group of college students can join in collaboration with Haitians, Dominicans, and Dominicans of Haitian descent to save a child's life and work against racial prejudice, what else can they accomplish?

Conclusion

I took a voyage to the Dominican Republic, and during this short trip my life, my pedagogy, my praxis, and my understanding of the Jesuit mission were all changed. I experienced life as a student for the first time in a long time, in what I consider to be the most transformative learning experience of my life. These lessons have drastically altered my approach to teaching and have also completely changed my life.

I challenge all teachers, professors, and education administrators to experience the benefits of CBL firsthand. I guarantee the experience will be transformative. "May the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks."²³ HJE

Notes

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